

“One Percenters”: Black Atheists, Secular Humanists, and Naturalists

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Abstract:

This essay explores an emergent black atheist, secular humanist, and naturalistic imagination. Based on a 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that measured the percentage of African Americans holding such views, I refer to this group as “one percenters.” Broadly speaking, one percenters view human nature and destiny (necessity and historical contingency) through an anthropological rather than a theological lens. As three perspectives on the same phenomenon, they are the dialectical other of theism and conventional forms of religion. In all three cases, negating theism does “positive” productive and creative work, energizing a different kind of affirmation. Nuances in rhetoric, emotional color, and practical engagement with religious cultures and institutions create distinctions among atheists, secular humanists, and naturalists that are more than merely artful and stylized. These nuances reveal different understandings of what nonbelief entails in matters of conduct and whether the negative and epistemic category of “nonbelief” properly describes their difference from theists.

Keywords: Religion | Theology | African Americans | Secular Humanism | Atheism

Article:

Religion is the love of life in the consciousness of impotence.— George Santayana, *The Works of George Santayana*

In this essay, I trace some milestones of an emerging *black atheist, secular humanist, and naturalistic imagination*. Based on “A Religious Portrait of African Americans,” a 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that characterizes atheists and agnostics as 1 percent of the black population (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009), I call the subjects of this essay “one percenters.” This term signifies on the Five Percenters, the Nation of Earths and Gods, which split from the Nation of Islam in 1963. I claim that atheism, secular humanism, and naturalism represent three perspectives on the same phenomenon. As the

dialectical other of theism, they constitute a kind of religious phenomenon (at least in the “binding together” etymology of the word *religion*). In all three cases, negating theism does productive and creative work, energizing a different kind of affirmation. Nuances in rhetoric, emotional color, and practical engagement with religious cultures and institutions create distinctions among atheists, secular humanists, and naturalists that are more than merely artful and stylized. These nuances reveal different understandings of what nonbelief entails in matters of conduct and whether “nonbelief” is a proper way of describing their difference from theists.

Not much of a prognosticator, I prefer to predict the future after it has already happened. However, if I were to hazard a guess about the future of black religion, I could not imagine it without according a more prominent role to one percenters.

Early Twentieth-Century Figures

In the early twentieth century, before and during World War I, Hubert Harrison was widely known as “the father of Harlem radicalism”:

His views on race and class profoundly influenced a generation of New Negro militants, including class-radical socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, the future communists Cyril Briggs and Richard B. Moore, and the race-radical Marcus Garvey. Considered more race conscious than Randolph and Owen and more class conscious than Garvey, Harrison is the key link in the ideological unity of the two great trends of the Black Liberation Movement—the labor and civil rights trend associated with Martin Luther King Jr., and the race and nationalist trend associated with Malcolm X. (Randolph and Garvey were, respectively, the direct links to King marching on Washington, with Randolph at his side, and to Malcolm, whose father was a Garveyite preacher and whose mother was a writer for Garvey’s *Negro World*, speaking militantly and proudly on Harlem’s Lenox Avenue.) (Perry 2009: 5)

Like other black notables in the first decades of the twentieth century—including A. J. Rogers, George S. Schuyler, Claude McKay, Walter E. Hawkins, Hodge Kirnon, Rothschild Francis, and W. E. B. Du Bois—Harrison was “influenced by freethought or atheism” (Perry 2009: 115). As skeptics, these figures were suspicious of the all-pervasive black church culture that Du Bois described in *The Souls of Black Folk*. They pursued political affiliations and modes of thinking such as the “freethought movement” that offered critically inflected freedom. Harrison’s freethought was related to his interest in Darwinian evolutionary theory. Though a proponent, he was not uncritical. He recognized the ways that many of his socialist allies endorsed racist interpretations of evolutionary theory (Perry 2009: 118–19). Harrison remarked: “The conception now prevailing that white people are superior and darker people inferior arose as the mental reflex of a social fact.

That fact was the military and political dominations exercised by European whites over the darker people who as late as the fourteenth century had been superior to them” (quoted in Perry

2009: 118–19). While Harrison’s Darwinism came with a good dose of Lamarckism (the notion that acquired characteristics are heritable), he regarded races, in contemporary jargon, as *social kinds* rather than *natural kinds* (Perry 2009: 122).¹ The same freethought orientation that encompasses Harrison’s Darwinism also illuminated his opposition to the tax-exempt status of churches, which he expressed in a newspaper article titled “The Menace of Exemption” (Harrison 1911, quoted in Perry 2009: 136). Offering an internal critique based on the narrative logic of Christian scripture, he argued that Jesus’s ethic did not support exemption. He augmented this claim with an external critique of the alleged social benefits of exemption. He regarded tax exemption as a net loss both economically and socially. Given the cultural and political salience of the church among African Americans, Harrison’s jaundiced view of religious institutions, *especially the church*, undermined his prospects as a mass leader (Perry 2009: 136–37).

Agnostic as a matter of epistemology, atheist as a matter of belief, Harrison was an archetypical “New Negro.” In *The Negro’s God as Reflected in His Literature*, Benjamin E. Mays (1968) lamented the growing irreligion of this cohort of Blackamericans (militant advocates of black liberation). Addressing sympathetic white liberals, Mays issued the following jeremiad: “unless liberal prophetic religion moves more progressively to the left in the effort to achieve complete citizenship rights for the Negro, he will become more irreligious and he will become more militant and communistic in his efforts to attain to full manhood in American life” (Mays 1968: 244). In support of his claim, Mays cited several examples: Countee Cullen’s “Heritage,” “The Black Christ,” and other poems; the novels of Du Bois, including *Darkwater*; Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*; Walter White, *Fire in the Flint*; and Jessie Redmond Fauset, *Plum Bum*. In addition, he cited James Weldon Johnson’s autobiography, *Along This Way*, George S. Schuyler’s explicit confession that “I am an atheist,” and Langston Hughes—“easily the most Communistic of the writers used in this study” (Mays 1968: 219–220, 225–228, 234, 237, 239). This list of writers, scholars, and activists is a “Who’s Who” of black America. Notice how Mays correlates irreligion, militancy, and communism, as well as impiety and political radicalism. With minor qualifications, this is a good description of Harrison: antireligious, militant race man, radical socialist. Though Mays did not mention him, Harrison fits the description of those African Americans (the New Negroes) who “doubt God’s value,” regard God as dead (a fairytale that once upon a time was useful, but no longer is), and those who deny the very existence of God (Mays 1968: 218).

The Academic Discourse of Secular Humanism

As the dialectical other (the negative) of black theists and religionists traditionally defined, one percenters—atheists, secular humanists, and naturalists—are typically excluded from black religious studies. William R. Jones and Anthony B. Pinn are the leading African American secular humanists. Through a rigorous philosophical critique of contemporary black theologians, Jones provides a paradigm for an African American secular humanism. As a dialectical response to Jones’s model, Pinn translates a philosophical critique of black theology into a theological

critique of black theism. As with all translations, something is lost. The argumentative rigor of Jones's account does not survive nor does the existential urgency. Jones wrote in the wake of the civil rights and Black Power movements. Revolution was in the air, revolutionaries in the streets. In this revolutionary situation, the rhetoric of analysts matched the fervor of the revolutionaries. Though more restrained than many, Jones's rhetoric exhibits this fervor. Pinn wrote after the Reagan counterrevolution, the antiblack backlash, and the ascendancy of neoliberalism, the achievements of which were consolidated by George H. W. Bush and William Jefferson Clinton. This was a period of retreat. The writings of Jones and Pinn reflect these contextual differences and divergent historical conjunctures.

Divine Racism as the Reductio ad absurdum of Black Theism

Jones's *Is God a White Racist?* is the first significant effort after Mays to write one percenters into black religious studies. Jones's method includes a reductio ad absurdum argument. Such an argument seeks to undermine claims by showing the absurd consequences of taking them seriously. Jones argues that black theological claims—that black suffering, neither redemptive nor deserved, violates God's justice and will; that God vindicates the oppressed, among whom black people are prototypes, through historical acts of liberation; that God is black—lead to the conclusion that the God of black liberation is a white racist (Jones 1998). The intentions of black theologians notwithstanding, their claims lead to this conclusion. So how does Jones reach his conclusion?

First, it is important to understand what he is not doing: making a *reductio ad impossibile* argument, providing an irrefutable argument in support of the claim that God is a white racist, knocking down any argument against his claim through the sheer power of the principle of noncontradiction. Jones does not want the claim that God *is* a white racist to prevail. Rather, his reductio ad absurdum of black theology is a plea for reformation. He wants black theologians to revise their claims about God to make them less vulnerable to the very notion of divine racism. Jones is a secular humanist who has resigned himself to the likelihood that the black multitude will not embrace his perspective any time soon. Short of such an embrace, Jones seeks to persuade black theologians, insofar as they are thought leaders among black theists, to adopt a form of theism less vulnerable to the charge of divine racism under whose terms the question "Is God a white racist?" is unlikely to arise. He knows that the most effective approach and potentially the most devastating is an internal critique: an analysis of the basic assumptions held by black theologians, a reductio ad absurdum account that reveals ethical-political quietism as the consequence of the liberation ethic of black theologians.

The intrinsic goodness of God represents the infra-assumption of black theology, the assumption beneath the assumptions Jones makes explicit. This *infrared* assumption, so to speak, lies on a part of the theological spectrum that is usually invisible and thus unrecognized as subject to skeptical questioning. Jones uses two concepts to challenge this assumption: "God as the Sum of His Acts" and the "multievidentiality of suffering" (Jones 1998: 11, 15). The upshot of the

challenge is this: suffering can be evidence for a good God or a demonic God; Golgotha may reveal a self-sacrificial God or the torturer-in-chief. The evidence is inherently ambiguous. Jones argues: "Though black suffering may raise the question of divine racism or malevolence, the answer cannot be determined by an examination of the suffering alone" (Jones 1998: 9). But what happens when we regard God as the sum of his acts? This standard of evaluation jettisons the infra-assumption regarding God's intrinsic goodness, predicating conclusions about "*Who God is* on the basis of *what He has done* for black people" (14). If God is what God does, if God liberates black people, then history should bear witness to God's acts of liberation. With the biblical Exodus as the model, where God liberates Hebrew slaves from Egyptian bondage, Jones argues that one finds no comparable *exaltation event*, a historical reversal of black peoples' collective misfortune. To appeal, as some black theologians do, to a future act of liberation signals nothing less than desperation. Desperation is also evident in James H. Cone's response to Jones's criticism. Faced with the devastating consequences of Jones's *reductio*, Cone resorts to a decidedly traditional, question-begging, and nonrevolutionary account where Jesus's life, death, and resurrection are the event of black liberation.² With this tepid conclusion one must resist the signs of boredom, the temptation to blink and yawn; one wonders what all the fuss and hyperbole regarding liberation is about. Jones's reduction smokes out Cone and other would-be theological revolutionaries and sends them scurrying toward a traditional theological bunker. The door of that bunker has closed and rusted.

This retreat to tradition and convention must have disappointed Jones. The point of his critique is to goad black theologians toward a theological model that makes good on their liberationist aims by avoiding the ethical-political quietism inherent in their claims regarding the nature of God. As a *via media* between traditional theism from which Jones sought to wean black theologians and the secular humanism he hoped they might eventually embrace, humanocentric theism constituted an effort to split the difference. But the difference would be split in such a way that the liberation interests of black people would be served. Insofar as there are intentional agencies in the world, humanocentric theism affirms the functional ultimacy of humans. Human choices and their consequences reign supreme. Human co-creative power constrains divine agency. God exercises persuasive rather than coercive power. Divine purposes do not predetermine human destiny (Jones 1998: 187–88, 191–92). While acknowledging that "humanocentric theism does not honor every pressing demand of a contemporary black theodicy," Jones contends that it addresses the major issues: eliminating the specter of divine racism and devitalizing the impulse toward ethical-political quietism (186).

As a secular humanist, Jones is less interested in debunking theism in the manner of the "New Atheists" than defanging it. This strategy to live, defang, and let live is one mode of self-presentation among one percenters. By providing the outline of an alternative, humanocentric approach to theism, Jones attempts to mitigate the ethical-political dangers of traditional theocentric forms. This underscores the live, defang, and let live strategy. Jones's motives are predominately ethical-political rather than epistemic. Though Jones may share the epistemic-

driven exasperation of those who seek to debunk theism, he subordinates this desire to the ends of liberation. He recognizes that theism is hegemonic among Blackamericans, so humanocentric theism is a strategy in a “war of position” whose ultimate aim is the cultural hegemony of secular humanism. Jones does not use this Gramscian language, but I think that this is a fair account of his view.

Consolidating and Extending Jones’s Legacy

Jones is the pivotal one percenter. Anyone writing about African American humanism after him does so under the immense shadow of his influence. Beginning with his first monograph *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, Anthony Pinn has struggled to develop his own voice. Pinn pursues a “one-up” strategy vis-à-vis Jones, as if to say, “I’ll take your point about black theism, ethical-political quietism, and secular humanism and raise you one.”³ Pinn draws an invidious contrast between his “strong humanism” and the “weak humanism” of Jones, which he allegedly shares with Delores Williams, Cornel West, and others (Pinn 1995: 141–45). Weak humanists are ambiguous and ambivalent regarding the existence of God. Untroubled in this way, strong humanists confront human suffering directly and more effectively. If Pinn presents himself as a more consistent and thus radical exponent of secular humanism, then Jones epitomizes a kind of halfhearted humanist, one who “pulls his punches.” Does this presentation accurately represent matters, or does Pinn engage in a bit of misreading, if not sleight-of-hand?

On my view, Pinn does not grasp Jones’s rhetorical strategy of internal critique and *reductio ad absurdum*. He seems not to understand the relationship between this mode of argument and Jones’s secular humanist ends. This discursive mismatch between Jones’s philosophical analysis of suffering in black theology and Pinn’s theological account of that analysis produces a misreading. Pinn commits an error that Sherman Jackson (2009) replicates in his comparative study of black suffering in Islam and Christianity. Both take humanocentric theism as Jones’s normative view when in fact it is a strategic *via media*, a Deweyan end-in-view, the ultimate end of which is secular humanism. In short Pinn and Jackson read Jones as if he were a theologian rather than a secular humanist philosopher who presents an internal critique of theological discourse to achieve a specific end. Pinn does not recognize the extent to which his distinction between strong and weak humanism mimics Jones’s distinction between secular humanism and humanocentric theism. To put it bluntly, Pinn appropriates Jones’s distinction between types of humanism without attribution. Jones clearly describes secular humanism as his normative view. “Strong misreadings” are part of the engine that makes criticism run. Pinn’s Bloomesque misreading of Jones empowers his own account of humanism.

If Jones’s principal strategy regarding theism is live, defang, and let live, then Pinn seeks to debunk and root out. It is important to understand the relativity of this distinction. As a matter of sheer debunking virtuosity, Pinn does not approach Jones’s level. However, as I read them, debunking theism—that is, an epistemically driven desire to take down theism—motivates Pinn more powerfully than it does Jones. Where debunking constitutes Pinn’s principal aim, Jones’s

debunking work subserves his ethical-political aims. In comparison, Pinn's ethical-political aims are muted. Again, I offer this distinction as relative rather than absolute.

I claim that Pinn's chief conceptual contribution to African American secular humanism lies, to use a hip-hop metaphor, in "sampling and remixing" Jones's secular humanist/humanocentric theist distinction. The result is Pinn's distinction between strong and weak humanism. But his importance rests less in his conceptual innovations than in his role as the chief disseminator of secular humanist ideas among African Americans. Pinn's canvas is broad: theology, folklore, literature, and the culture of popular music. He traces the way individuals in these varied cultural sites represent black suffering, teases out intimations of atheism extending back to slavery (protoversions), and argues for a forthright embrace of atheism as the preferable option for black people. Pinn uses the biblical character Nimrod as a trope for African American humanists. This Promethean figure defies the biblical god. Drawing on biblical genealogies and popular belief, Pinn plays with the notion that Nimrod is a black man. As a myth, Nimrod can do for black secular humanists "what Prometheus has done for their white fellow travelers" (Pinn 2004: 5). As a prolific scholar and tireless exponent of the one percent, Pinn has done more than anyone to give this group of African Americans a recognizable face. Among an impressive list of texts, his contributions include *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (2003), *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (2003), and *African American Religious Life and the Story of Nimrod* (2007). Whether single authored, cowritten, or an edited volume, Pinn's body of work is a milestone in one percenter thought.

Pinn has the distinction of having written the first systematic nontheistic African American theology. If systematic theology provides a comprehensive account of the Christian faith (God and humanity, revelation, sin, and salvation), then Pinn attempts to do the same for non-Christian and nontheistic orientations. He turns to quotidian spaces such as coffeehouses and barbershops for the sources of his theology. In turn, he derives the norms for his theology from the community, which he characterizes as a "centering category." I shall have more to say about community momentarily. First, I should note that Pinn's systematic nontheistic theology, his *atheology*, includes an account of the complex subjectivity of the humanist self that presumably flourishes within the humanist community he envisions, an aesthetic that centers on symmetry, an ethics, and an important account of the ritual life of humanists—the actions, doing and making, associated with humanist beliefs. Each of these elements is interesting in its own right and merits individualized attention.

As Pinn conceives it, humanist community succeeds and supersedes God as the center of gravity and existential orientation (Pinn 2012: 30). Drawing on Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities," Pinn seeks to avoid essentialist notions. Rather than describing this humanist community directly, he pursues a strategy of indirection and negation: a kind of *via negativa*. Neither Martin Luther King's beloved community nor Howard Thurman's inwardness-within-community, Pinn's humanist community eludes direct and positive description (36–40). While appreciating his desire to avoid essentialism, one can fairly ask whether this elusiveness is

a distinguishing aspect of humanist community or Pinn's failure to describe it adequately. I find it odd that Pinn uses what amounts to an apophatic theological strategy to describe a central feature of his *atheology*. In doing so, he comes close to making humanist community ineffable. If apophatic theists claim (often for dogmatic reasons) that we cannot speak directly about God, then Pinn makes the same claim about humanist community. He mimics in an unhelpful way the theocentric theologies he criticizes. While I respect Pinn's ethical qualms regarding exclusions and premature closure, it must be acknowledged that everything we say is contaminated by its other and can potentially lead to affirmations we abhor. However, we cannot describe matters of importance such as secular humanist community without running the risk of essentializing. For the benefit of fellow travelers, Pinn needs to take the risk.

I conclude this section on Pinn with a comparative note on my perspective as a one percenter. If a mode of inquiry denies the mind-independent reality gods and God (g/God), then why call it theology? To many ears, a "nontheistic theology" sounds like an oxymoron. But Pinn insists that it is not. Theology is not owned by theists. On his humanist definition, "*Theology is a method for critically engaging, articulating and discussing the deep existential and ontological issues endemic to human life*" (Pinn 2012: 6). If we agree, as I do, that these kinds of concerns are unavoidable for most normally developed adult *Homo sapiens*, then it should not matter that nontheistic theology sounds oxymoronic. The problem of intelligibility has less to do with the sounds Pinn makes than with what listeners have been trained to hear. Yet, I find it difficult to regard my own work as theological. Pinn was trained as a theologian. I was trained as a critical theorist of religion, an interdisciplinary orientation that represents an ethical-political sublation (*Aufhebung*) of Christian ethics and expresses dissatisfaction with a philosophy of religion that was little more than a valet for theology. This orientation developed within the interstices of theology, philosophy, and the various critical and postcritical discourses of the last few decades. So I resist the appellation "theologian" even though Pinn and I crisscross much of the same territory.

Atheism as a Political Orientation

Michael Lackey explores expressions of atheism in the texts of Frantz Fanon, J. Saunders Redding, Richard Wright, Nella Larsen, and Langston Hughes, among others. His analysis is driven by the conviction that theism is a political problem for African Americans:

Instead of recognizing that they will achieve personal and communal agency only when they become creators and definers of "knowledge," "laws," and the "political," believers according to African American atheists, accept their culture's "truth" as God-created truth. Such a situation places believers in a passive position with regard to knowledge, not realizing that those truths "man himself has wrought," as Redding claims. And as Hughes consistently notes in his fiction, "in believing in God and His truth, believers are actually at the epistemic mercy of those who politically control the economic means of production. . . . In sum, what African American atheists want their readers to know and

understand is this: God and his laws are, as [Zora Neale] Hurston claims, creatures of the human mind, and since humans are governed by the selfish hand,” the god and laws that humans create will reflect their selfish interest, needs, and desires. Therefore instead of allowing themselves to be ruled by some pregiven law of being, Hurston, Wright, Hughes, and Redding implicitly urge the black community to recognize that God is a human creation and therefore to take control of their lives either by creating God and God-truths or by abolishing God altogether. (Lackey 2002: 139)

Lackey’s conceptual apparatus interests me more than his reading of particular African American atheists. This apparatus comprises two concepts: the “epistemological/ontological recursive loop,” henceforth EORL, and the quasi-Marxist term the “intellectual means of production.” EORL refers to a state of affairs where the dominant group defines what counts as knowledge, which underwrites the group’s claims about the nature of things, including the status of subdominant groups. Lackey characterizes these groups, respectively, as “believers” and “infidels.” As God’s chosen people, believers compose the in-group while infidels constitute the out-group. This knowledge and status relation between believer and infidel repetitively generate and reinforce each other. Using their epistemic superiority, believers disempower infidels and rob them of articulate speech. This “power/knowledge” enables white people (the archetypical believers in Lackey’s account) to construct black people as nonhuman. Neither believers nor infidels, black atheists are not subject to EORL (Lackey 2002: 12–13). Unlike their theistic kin, they know that there is no “God-created truth”—that the very idea is a religious subterfuge of white supremacy.

Colored with hyperbole, Lackey hypothesizes the existence of EORL but provides no argumentative support and ignores contrary evidence. He treats the logical consequences of concepts as if they were empirical. But one should not confuse the logic of conceptual relations—what is true when we abstract from circumstantial considerations—with what actually occurs in quotidian life. Circumstance and contingencies stand between idea and event, qualifying if not undermining simple causal relations between the two. Marx argued that the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas. This is certainly true. But those ideas are neither absolute nor irresistible. Contra Lackey, black theists even when enslaved and illiterate do not behave like cowed subjects of the dominant discourse regarding God and truth. While subject to the ruling ideas, they are not merely the playthings of those who control the “intellectual means of production.” Under the regime of chattel slavery, the master class explicitly constructed the god concept and related ideas according to white supremacist codes. Yet, slaves managed to resist and negotiate dominant theological ideas by offering counternarratives. As Stuart Hall has long argued, disseminating ideas always entails processes of encoding and decoding. No matter how dominant, no group can guarantee that the message sent will be the message received. Blackamericans decoded slavery-justifying theological codes in light of their communal interests. Signifying on the master’s narrative, they often constructed god and justice in

ways that subverted the racist codes of those who subjugated them. Thus the message they received was not the message masters sent. Blackamericans do not merely consume signs like a person with a deficient and nondiscriminating sense of taste; they create and interpret signs also. Thus the notion of an irresistible “intellectual means of production”—that fills all the interpretive gaps, undermines every attempt at “negotiating meaning,” eliminates every line of creative escape and thus renders black theists signless, devoid of semiotic agency—is nonsensical and ahistorical. Rather than argue for theology, I accent the subtlety and sophistication required to prosecute the case against it. My point underscores the magnitude of the task of those who seek to refute theism rather than to deconstruct or circumvent it. By advancing an argument any sophisticated theist can rebut, Lackey undercuts his own advocacy. A robust atheism must avoid dogmatism and mimetic rivalry. Otherwise theism *and* atheism are rightly viewed as two faces of the same dogmatic problem. A dogmatic approach such as this leads readers like me to conclude that they are neither theists nor atheists.

Lackey should be praised for placing black atheism in dialogue with a broad range of philosophers and other critical thinkers. In this regard, he is more philosophically expansive and adventurous than Jones. But his account lacks the focus, the command of the subject matter, and the rigor of Jones’s analysis.⁴ My primary criticism of Lackey concerns his failure to make good on the implicit promise that he would outline the productive relationship between atheism and political liberation. He assumes what he needs to demonstrate: that atheism has a progressive, liberationist, and democratic politics. I doubt he can demonstrate what he assumes. Affirming or denying the reality of g/God⁵ does not entail specific political orientations. (Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, was an atheist; so was Ayn Rand, the libertarian proponent of unconstrained capitalism, of Atlas “shrugging” off the burdens of government.) Lackey’s suggestion to the contrary, reactionaries and revolutionaries, racists and antiracists, proponents of foundationalist epistemologies and critics, all are, collectively, on both sides of the theism–atheism divide. In the language of that great atheist and political revolutionary Karl Marx, the theism–atheism couplet *mystifies* the real issue: under the right circumstances, or the wrong ones as the case may be, humans do terrible things to each other, to animals, and to the ecology. Theism and atheism are existential orientations that broadly frame how we make sense of things. They are habits of thought, not genetic signals or algorithms that strictly determine what we do. Neither theism nor atheism can substitute for the hard work of ethical-political thinking. Too often, Lackey relies on the mere invocation and incantation of atheism to do the ethical-political work that it (like theism) cannot do.

Three cheers for Lackey. Though he fails to establish his central claim adequately, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation* is an ambitious work and represents another milestone in one percenter thinking.

Gender, Imperialism, and Race

The term *one percenter* should not be taken literally. The category may comprise more than 1 percent of the African American population. But it is hard to know the actual number of atheists, secular humanists, and naturalists. Some may be posing, “passing for theists,” living closeted lives, or otherwise hiding. In fifteenth-century Iberia, Jews were often forced to convert to Christianity under intense pressure from a bigoted, inquisitorial establishment. Called Marranos and Conversos, they were often suspected of practicing Judaism in secret. There were various efforts by the church to root them out. Insofar as these converts were in fact secret Jews, Jews in Christian garb, they are an apt metaphor for one percenters in hiding. I suspect that many one percenters live lives of quiet desperation within or on the borders of black churches and other places of worship. They are forced to be there by social pressure within black communities where religion, especially Christianity, is regarded as a constitutive element of authentic black identity. On this view, normative black identity is *Christian blackness* or, minimally, *theistic blackness*. So they genuflect without conviction before the gods of their fathers and the gods of their tribe. These black Conversos are converts in reverse. They fear revealing themselves, declaring who they are lest they be censored and even ostracized in a society where the black church is an institutional center of black life and white supremacy is an enduring reality.

No one addresses this reality more effectively than Sikivu Hutchinson. In *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values War*, she presents the most concrete, wide-ranging, and accessible account of the kind of thinking and doing characteristic of one percenters. Though a scholar by training, she bids us to descend from the lofty heights of academic discourses to the valleys that often circumscribe the world of everyday black life. Unlike the male one percenters I have canvassed thus far, the perspectives of proponents of gender justice and feminism explicitly drive Hutchinson’s analysis. To summarize her views, God, religion, and church are blights on African American life. They superintend and reinforce a pathological entanglement of predatory masculinity, the denigration of black women, dogmatism, and anti-intellectualism that are inimical to the interests of African Americans. This diagnosis is true despite the fact that the black church has often been a site of solidarity and resistance within a white supremacist society. However much her claims may offend, they seem manifestly true to me and noncontroversial from an evidence-based perspective.

Hutchinson provides plenty of evidence in support of her claims. The list of horrible things include opposition to civil rights for gays and lesbians by prominent black churches; rampant homophobia (Hutchinson 2011: 11, 13, 17); the construction of black atheists, especially black women as immoral race traitors (20, 38); the increasing commitment among African Americans to antichoice views (abortion as black genocide) (82); the widespread denial of Darwinian evolution and support for teaching creationism in public schools (89, 118); and “some of the most negative views of atheists among all groups” (103). Hutchinson remarks: “The socially conservative tenor of African American communities has marginalized skeptical, agnostic, or atheist analyses of black politics and culture” (126). Too often, she argues, churches are little more than schools of bigotry. These are her most salient points.

Buffeted by black cultural conservatism on their far right, one percenters are also constrained on their near right by the impervious and patronizing attitude of white atheists. Hutchinson remarks that “many white atheists and humanists believe that just being an atheist magically exempts them from the institutionally racist belief systems and practices of the dominant culture” (213). To this point, she adds: “As delineated by many white nonbelievers the New Atheism preserves and reproduces the status quo of white supremacy in its arrogant insularity. In this universe, oppressed minorities are more imperiled by their own investment in organized religion than white supremacy. Liberation is not a matter of fighting against white racism, sexism, and classism but of throwing off the shackles of superstition” (218). This is part of a withering critique that Hutchinson levels against the New (White) Atheists who fail to make opposition to racism, gender injustice, and imperialism a constitutive part of their antitheism. From all this, we draw an important conclusion: white supremacy, antiracism, and the whole array of pernicious hierarchies are on both sides of the theism–atheism divide. They do not disappear merely because God has.

By explicitly wedding antitheism to gender justice, antiracism, and anti-imperialism, Hutchinson achieves a milestone in one percenter thought.

Pragmatic Naturalism and the 1 Percent

Why is naturalism difficult to embrace? Is the cost of that embrace a certain irremediable sadness? In the following passage, George Santayana poses questions that no thoughtful one percenter can evade:

All certain knowledge seems to describe material laws, yet a deified nature has generally inspired a religion of melancholy. Why should the only intelligible philosophy seem to defeat reason and the chief means of benefiting mankind seem to blast our best hopes? . . . Whence this persistent search for invisible regions and powers and for metaphysical explanations that can explain nothing . . . Why is that sensuous optimism we may call Greek, or that industrial optimism we may call American, such a thin disguise for despair? . . . Why has man’s conscience in the end invariably rebelled against naturalism and reverted in some form or other to a cultus of the unseen? (Santayana 1936: 3:149–50)

Without a doubt, naturalism entails the loss of the metaphysical comforts associated with religion. Gone is the notion of a transcendent intelligent power that ensures cosmic justice in some time beyond temporality, a divine observer who watches over us, whose interest, knowledge, and attentiveness give our existence meaning and significance: “the fellow sufferer who understands” (Whitehead 1979: 351), our father and mother. The loss of these notions produces sadness. Thus, Santayana introduces this passage from *The Life of Reason* under the section heading: “Naturalism sad” (Santayana 1936: 3:149).

How does a naturalist deal with this loss and sadness? One acknowledges the loss and embraces the life it makes possible. The following affirmations capture the naturalistic sensibility quite

well: *Homo sapiens* are gods who shit (Becker 1997: 58); “Religion is the love of life in the consciousness of impotence” (Santayana 1936: 3:38). Proud of her powers but conscious of powerlessness in the face of death, the pragmatic naturalist rejects every manner of denial and recognizes the unavoidable sadness that shadows life. Death is the ultimate horizon of life. We die. I, as this particular individual, shall die. Despite the illusion that we are like gods, bear the image of god, have godlike cognitive and moral capacities that make us categorically different than other animals, *Homo sapiens*, human animals, shit, succumb to disease, grow old, and die. Pragmatic naturalists love life in the consciousness of impotence, affirm transitory joys amidst persistent-all-too-persistent sorrows, and pursue justice in a world where many injustices are never acknowledged much less remediated and most victims die anonymously. This is not Nietzsche’s *amor fati* (love of fate). Whether grudging or affirmative, the pragmatic naturalist is not a fatalist of any sort. But she does acknowledge the radical contingencies that characterize human existence. She regards the human-all-too-human experiences of disappointment, dread, defeat, disease as intimations of death, and dehumanizing oppression. These experiences remind us of the imperfections and unsatisfactoriness at the foundation of all things. We shit, literally sit on a pile of excrement (the putrefaction within), which symbolizes the fact, smell, and consciousness of death. Pragmatic naturalism begins here.

This is not to suggest that humans do not imagine themselves as more than animals. Nor is it to suggest that humans do not have evolved capacities, including the ability to consciously manipulate evolutionary processes, which causes us to fit oddly within the animal kingdom and to stand out in the most conspicuous manner. We do have capacities that make us highly distinctive, so much so that we can imagine ourselves as godlike. We can imagine a spiritualized destiny complete with nonmaterial bodies (without moist and smelly orifices) where our animality has been left behind. Our spiritualizing imagination notwithstanding, we kill and eat, shit and stink: earthly reminders of the realities that circumscribe our transcendent fantasies. Thus Ernest Becker’s memorable phrase: man is “a god who shits” (1997: 58). Humans have a transcendent, sign-enabled imagination tethered to ravenous jaws and foul anuses. The most transcendent and predatory of species (apex predators), humans are paradoxical animals. That is who we are.

What could be more comical, more side-splittingly hilarious than a god who shits? And so, the naturalist finds herself laughing through all the shit, all the way to grave. Yes, naturalism is sad, but it is funny as hell too. Even for a death-bound subject, laughter reveals a certain “lightness of being.” Behind the laughter lies a dialectical interplay of piety and impiety. The naturalist acknowledges finitude and the contingences that condition, position, and bear down on us.⁶ But she refuses to consecrate them, to make those necessities and contingencies holy.

As I remarked before with respect to atheism and secular humanism, naturalism is neither an ethics nor a politics. It may *proscribe* certain orientations such as divine command ethics and theocratic politics but does not *prescribe* a specific ethical-political orientation. Those one percenters who think they have done the necessary ethical-political work merely by declaring

their nontheistic beliefs are mistaken. Only intentional acts of articulation can consummate and sustain the marriage of naturalism and emancipatory forms of ethics and politics. As a naturalist, I am committed to this marriage. This commitment entails precisely the antiracist, antiimperialist, and pro-gender justice orientations that Hutchinson describes. (Crosscutting these three commitments is the struggle against an international division of labor governed by neoliberal priorities.) While one percenters may, as an empirical matter, be biased toward these progressive orientations, this is not an issue of necessity. One percenters may very well exhibit the aristocratic sensibility of a Nietzsche with his antidemocratic celebration of the “pathos of distance” or the “free” market-deifying orientation of an Ayn Rand with her distinction between “creators” and “parasites.”⁷ Or, in contrast, they might manifest the escapist and defeatist nihilism of Cross Damon in Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*. As one percenters, we forget these nonoptimal possibilities at our own peril.

One percenters speak the same language. Atheism, secular humanism, and naturalism are different accents or, at the extremes, dialects, within a common language. All one percenters deny the mind-independent reality of g/God. But they may very well draw different inferences from this common denial. As a preferential option, should we minimize the dangers that theism poses to black communities or accent the absurdity of god talk? While it is doubtful that any one percenter regards these options as mutually exclusive, questions such as these reveal the inferential differences between *defanging* and *debunking* strategies. *Pragmatic sincerity* represents an overlapping and competing strategy: a third mode of self-presentation among one percenters. Having sucked the marrow from the bones of skepticism, the pragmatic naturalist is sincerely ironic.⁸ Her irony is so thick that some might accuse her of bad faith, of passing as a theist, of being a modern-day Marrano.

To illustrate this possibility, I shall adopt a first- rather than a third-person perspective since it is directly related to the claims I make. I describe myself variously as a naturalist, pragmatic naturalist, pragmatic religious naturalist, and naturalistic Christian. I can imagine the following responses: Isn’t the very idea of a naturalistic Christian an oxymoron? If, as a rebuttable presumption, Pinn’s nontheistic theology is oxymoronic, then isn’t naturalistic Christianity even more so? Why would a naturalist call himself a Christian? Is he confused? Is he making some kind of category mistake? Isn’t Christianity nature transcendent? These are fair questions.

To address them, I draw on Søren Kierkegaard’s distinction between the ethical-religious orientations of *resignation* and *faith*. One might speak of the naturalistic Christian as Kierkegaard does of the knight of faith: “He goes to church. No heavenly gaze or any sign of the incommensurable betrays him; if one did not know him, it would be impossible to distinguish him from the rest of the crowd, for at most his hearty and powerful singing of the hymns proves that he has good lungs” (Kierkegaard 1983: 39). Like Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, who is so nondescript as to be indistinguishable

from any other bourgeois philistine (39) within a decadent Christendom, the naturalistic Christian may resemble the theist beside him in the pews. Here, to pour the irony even more thickly, the naturalistic Christian occasionally attends church. But why would he do this? I call myself a naturalistic Christian because I was shaped by a Christian habitus—that is, I was socialized hearing, reading, and reciting Christian stories, singing Christian songs, participating in forms of bodily deportment and a “structure of feeling” (Williams 1978: 133–34)⁹ associated with the black church. Thus I am the product of what Theo Smith describes as the biblical formation of black American identity (Smith 1994). But my formation is not exactly as Smith describes. I am attached to biblical stories in the same way that I am connected to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In both cases, the gods are literary characters. Whether well or poorly crafted, their import is merely poetic. Like the baby ghost in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, they make the stories more interesting.

These stories expand my imagination and ethical rhetoric. In addition to aesthetic and tropological attachments, there are practical connections also. I live cheek-to-jowl with Christians. My family and “some of my best friends” are theists. So in the presence of those I love, I act out these attachments on my own terms. When I sing spirituals or hymns, I am Kierkegaard’s nondescript, bourgeois philistine-appearing knight of faith turned inside out.¹⁰ To “turn out” a knight of faith is to deny the mind-independent reality of g/God, to affirm that traditional religion gets things backwards: that humans create and g/God is their creature. So my rejoinder to the charge of bad faith is this: I am neither ignorant of what I *really* think nor self-deceived. I am not hiding the truth or hiding from the truth. Beneatha Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* puts it well: “There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is *he* who makes miracles!” (Hansberry 2004: 51).

g/God is a miracle of the human imagination: the greatest and most *sublime* character *Homo sapiens* has ever invented. This miracle comes complete with ceremonial behaviors. Like those associated with the nation-state—singing the national anthem, displaying, saluting, and handling the flag—the rituals of theism and religious life are sometimes hokey. And yet, by demanding specific forms of bodily comportment, they produce aptitudes and virtues that are subject formative in ways the naturalist approves (Asad 1993: 62, 72). While refusing behaviors that reinforce dispositions we abhor (such as kneeling, head bowed, hands clasped in supplication before king and god), the naturalist claims ownership of the ceremonial, rite, and ritual commonwealth that *Homo sapiens* have created. The naturalist remakes, reconstructs, and reoccupies these practices for her own purposes.¹¹ In this regard, consider Santayana’s remark that “prayer is a soliloquy” (Santayana 1936: 4:30). On this naturalistic view, when people pray they engage in an expressive rather than a utilitarian act; in short, they whisper in their own ear. Talking to oneself can be therapeutic. There is no principled reason why one percenters should not avail themselves of this old form of autosuggestion in which we talk to ourselves as if we were talking to someone else. What could be more natural? Cutting through the overlapping but divergent evolution of *Homo sapiens* as biological organisms and as cultural beings, our

semiotic, linguistic, and symbolic capacities underwrite Santayana's naturalistic understanding of prayer.

These evolved capacities also allow us to imagine counterfactual realities such as the "ought" of ethical judgments (this rather than that *ought* to be the case) and to partially realize them, to make them facts in the world. Ethics and politics are among the ways that *Homo sapiens* have made life more livable. Bound up in complex ways with both, religion is a way of making life livable. Bees make honey, birds build nests, and spiders spin webs of beauty and death. Humans create g/God: the nasty, the naughty, and the nice; the one and the many; the "one true God" and all the "false gods." These creations make life a bit sweeter (or bitter, as the case may be); making things more intense and interesting, they relieve our boredom, provide a place to nest, and create a world of beauty and death. Religions are beautiful and deadly. As with the spider's web, their beauty and lethality are intimately connected. Like the nation-state and war, you can't have one without the other. The consequences of religion are morally ambiguous. Like their atheist and secular humanist comrades, naturalists seek to debunk and defang bad forms of religion. As 1 percent of the Blackamerican population, they engage in a Gramscian war of position, an effort to make the one percenter alternative hegemonic. Through a sincere though ironic engagement, the 1 percent strives to *occupy*, subvert, and transform the 99 percent. (This is an act of *pragmatic sincerity*, which sublates standard forms of pragmatic irony.) This may be a utopian goal, but a one percenter's reach should exceed her grasp. Indeed, "this worldly" transformation and Deweyan reconstruction (see Dewey 2012) may be the only proper use of Robert Browning's heaven.

By way of conclusion, I reiterate an earlier claim: atheism, secular humanism, and naturalism are not an ethics or a politics. The connection between one's identity as a one percenter and a specific ethical-political orientation must be an intentional act. This orientation is forged through the life you live, the choices you make, the associations you maintain or abandon, and the allies and the enemies that you cultivate. There are many choices. At this present historical conjuncture, where poverty properly commands much of our attention, two issues that I find particularly compelling are penal slavery and sex slavery. Gendered in their targets, effects, and notoriety, mass incarceration and a coercive sex trade harm black communities disproportionately. Predatory labor and capital markets and gangsterism among the political class underwrite these harms. These issues among others ought to fire the ethical-political energies of one percenters.

I will not say that the future of black religion belongs to one percenters. However, one percenters certainly belong to the future of black religion.

Notes

1 I should note that an updated version of Lamarckism called epigenetics has gained credibility among evolutionary geneticists.

2 See Cone 1975. Specifically, see the chapter “Divine Liberation and Black Suffering,” where Cone attempts to respond to Jones’s devastating critique.

3 Humanism, religious humanism, and secular humanism are often used in ambiguous ways that permit considerable slippage and play.

4 Lackey has difficulty synthesizing the disparate figures he cites, does not recognize important tensions among them, or the implications of their views for the claims he wishes to make. For example, toward the end of the book, he calls for a democratic politics of God. Yet elsewhere he seems to accept Hurston’s Nietzschean claim that theism/Christianity and democracy are two sides of the same baneful reality. The Heideggerian-derived antihumanism that he outlines in chapter two dissolves into a fairly conventional humanism.

5 Regarding the terms *god* and *God*, I have a polemical aim and wish to express it in what I write. “[M]y use of ‘God’ is purposefully unconventional and inconsistent. Despite convention, I regard the English word God as a proper name for the Christian god and thus as a false generic. I take the generic and the proper name to be one and the same as a matter of practice. I signal my distrust of the convention by not capitalizing the word except where it is the first word in a sentence, when quoting others, or for emphasis. When referring to ‘God and the gods,’ I use the construction ‘g/God’” (Hart 2011: ix–x).

6 Charles Darwin’s account of evolution, Martin Heidegger’s notion of “thrownness,” Michel Foucault’s account of the discourses that constitute and position us as subjects, and James Gustafson’s account of the powers that pressure us capture what I have in mind.

7 I should note that this distinction is one that Rand puts in the mouth of Howard Roark, a character in *The Fountainhead*. As a general rule, one should not blur the difference between the views of an author and the views she attributes to a character. In Rand’s case, however, the conflation of author and character is a fair representation of her views.

8 *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (Purdy 1999) is a powerful critique of irony. I find much of Jedediah Purdy’s argument compelling. Nonetheless, I am not willing to abandon irony because of the positive work that it does. Using irony is worth the risk of succumbing to all the things that Purdy rightly condemns. My irony is quite sincere. See Willson (2013). I also recommend Cynthia Willett (2008), *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspective on Democracy and Freedom*. Willett remarks, “Queer send-ups of our sexual identities challenge, disrupt, and disorient not just the coercive policies of the state or discriminatory rules and practices of civil society, but also socio-psychological norms such as heterosexuality” (133). The ironic concept of the “naturalistic Christian” has a disruptive and disorienting place in my account of black identity.

9 Williams speaks primarily of emergent forms of art and literature, but I take his claims as relevant to mine.

10 I am making a point, not claiming to have the virtues of a knight.

11 Here I have John Dewey's notion of reconstruction and Hans Blumenberg's notion of reoccupation in mind.

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